# 3. Counts of Unsheltered Homeless People in Public Places

This chapter describes methods for counting unsheltered homeless people located in non-service locations – streets, parks, public buildings, parts of the transportation system, vehicles, and so on. The homeless people found in these areas are part of the group sometimes referred to as the "hidden homeless" or "street homeless" because they are not in easily accessed locations such as shelters. We refer to this approach as the "*public places*" method.

The methods below incorporate two dimensions: (1) the strategy for covering territory (known locations and/or covering every block) and (2) the intensity of data collection (counting, observation, and/or the use of interviewing). The public places count methodology can be tailored to suit your information needs, using your own combination of coverage and data collection strategies.

This chapter covers a wide range of topics related to designing and executing a public places count, including:

- Determining who should use the public places method;
- Deciding which type of public places method to use;
- Identifying locations to cover in the count;
- Selecting a date and time;
- Deciding who should conduct the count and providing training;
- Organizing the count;
- Determining who is homeless;
- Interviewing for supplemental information;
- Dealing with duplication; and
- Analyzing and reporting the data.

The final section of the chapter discusses the biases associated with a public places count and the feasibility and cost of employing this method.

## 3.1 Who Should Use the Public Places Method?

CoCs may want to consider using the public places method for counting and learning about unsheltered homeless people if they believe that many homeless people live in places not fit for human habitation and rarely use any type of homeless service. CoCs that use this approach should also be able to organize sufficiently to count and/or interview homeless people in identified geographic areas within a brief period of time (typically a few hours, but generally less than 24 hours).

The public places method is most commonly used in urban areas, where the CoC can mobilize teams of volunteers to walk the streets at night and record information on every homeless person they see. However, the method can also be used in suburban or rural areas, where enumerators do not try to cover every square mile but rather focus on a limited number of locations where homeless people are believed to congregate. The method has also been used statewide, where each local jurisdiction conducts a public places count and reports back to the statewide CoC. The key for large areas or CoCs that have a significant number of locations where homeless people gather is having an adequate number of staff and volunteers to conduct the count. Many CoCs combine a public places count with counts and interviews at non-shelter service sites such as soup kitchens and social service agencies (this is the service-based approach described in Chapter 4). CoCs using this combined approach will have to use one or more methods for eliminating duplication, as well as think carefully about the timing of data collection in each type of location.

The CoCs cited in this guide that conduct a traditional public places count, either going block-by-block (complete coverage) or focusing on locations where homeless people are expected to congregate, include:

- Philadelphia (PA)
- Seattle/King County (WA)
- New York City (NY)[3]
- Boston (MA)
- McHenry County (IL)
- Washington (DC).

The CoCs cited in this guide that combine a public places count with a service-based enumeration include:

- Washington Balance of State
- Pasadena (CA)
- Metro Atlanta (GA) Tri-Jurisdictional CoC
- Tallahassee (FL)
- Broward County (FL)
- Greater Grand Traverse Area (MI)
- Long Beach (CA)
- Denver (CO).

[3] New York City's 2003 count covered Manhattan only; the 2004 count was extended to Brooklyn and Staten Island.

## 3.2 Deciding Which Type of Public Places Method to Use

CoCs typically use one of three basic techniques to conduct public places counts.

**Method 1. A <u>count</u> and observation of homeless individuals and families living in public places that are not shelter or other service sites.**

A count can be conducted at *known locations* (those areas where homeless people are expected to congregate) or can strive for *complete coverage*. Complete coverage means that every part of a specified geography, such as an entire city or a downtown area, is covered. Instead of going only to specific blocks or locations (e.g., the bus station), this approach sends teams of enumerators to canvass every street looking for homeless people and counting anyone who is found. The complete coverage approach requires more people to conduct the enumeration because the territory to be covered is generally much greater. It may also require more coordination so that teams of enumerators do not cross into each other's territories and inadvertently double count people. Further, the approach may include going into spaces such as abandoned buildings where people are out of public view.

> Boston's annual count covers the entire city, while Philadelphia enumerators canvass every block of the city's downtown area and go to known locations in the outlying parts of the city.

Communities often pair the complete coverage of one geographic location with a count of homeless people at known locations in outlying areas. For example, a CoC may send enumerators up and down every street in a downtown area, and send groups to outlying parts of the city where homeless people are known to live and sleep.

> A basic count is the simplest of the public places data collection strategies. Even so, it takes considerable organization. Planning for and organizing the count involves:
>
> - Identifying known locations where one can expect to find homeless people, planning for complete coverage, or using a combination of the two approaches;
> - Picking a date and time for the count;
> - Recruiting and training people to conduct the count;
> - Planning for the deployment of people on the night of the count;
> - Establishing ground rules for who should be counted and what information obtained by observation will be recorded; and
> - Planning for the integration, analysis, and presentation of data after the count.

**Method 2. A count, observation, and interview of homeless individuals and families living in public places that are not shelter or other service sites.**

Including an interview component supplements a basic count and allows a community to gather pertinent demographic and other information about unsheltered homeless people. Organizers follow the procedures for a basic count and observation, but also create a questionnaire used to interview every person or a sample of people encountered during the enumeration. An interviewing component is particularly useful in collecting demographic and service use data. It may also be necessary for communities that do not have well-developed outreach services and, therefore, have minimal information on unsheltered populations and subpopulations. Interviewing is also essential to "unduplicate" the results of a point-in-time count in which double counting may have occurred. It is important to note that such interviewing *does not need to take place at the same time as the count.* As will be discussed further below, many communities find that it is not feasible (or desirable) to attempt to interview people during a one-night count.

**Method 3. A public spaces sampling method using high and low probabilities for designated geographic areas.**

This method was used by the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) in its 2003 count of unsheltered people in Manhattan as an alternative to complete coverage. Due to the sheer size of Manhattan and the impossibility of covering every street block, the count organizers divided the city into "study areas" of approximately three-tenths of a mile each. During extensive preparation for the count, each study area was classified as low, medium, or high density based on the number of homeless people expected to be found in that area. On the night of the count, enumerators visited every high density area and a statistically valid sample of medium and low density areas. The purpose of selecting a statistically valid sample of medium and low density areas was to be able to limit the number of areas enumerators had to cover while allowing the data collected on the night of the count to be extrapolated to the entire borough of Manhattan. Once the count was completed, the DHS used extrapolation procedures to estimate the number of homeless people that would have been counted in the areas not visited by the enumerators, thereby generating a count for the borough as a whole.

The methodology and statistical sampling procedures used in New York City's 2003 count are described in more detail in Chapter 5, as well as changes to the methodology implemented in the 2004 count. Although this method requires a fair amount of statistical sophistication, what is most challenging is determining whether each study area is a low, medium, or high-density area. This needs to be done through a series of meetings over several months with a wide range of local stakeholders, including anyone with knowledge of where homeless people tend to be found. In this exercise, great attention must be paid to the time of day during which key informants actually observe the areas. Daytime and nighttime users often differ dramatically and studies relying on daytime observations often find no one present when they visit in the middle of the night. Once each area is assigned a preliminary density (high, medium, or low), these designations will need to be revisited as close as possible to the day of the count to check for changes in the living and sleeping patterns of unsheltered homeless people.

**HUD STANDARD**
**Statistically Valid Methodology**

New York City's approach is recommended because it is based on a statistically valid methodology. HUD does not want CoCs using adjustment or inflation factors that do not have any statistical basis. If the New York approach is beyond the capabilities of your CoC, a straight count of known locations, even if it does not cover every place that unsheltered homeless people might stay, is perfectly acceptable. In the absence of a statistically valid methodology for extrapolating to non-covered areas, HUD wants CoCs to report on only those people actually seen on the night of the count.

### Public Places Counts Are Not "One-Size-Fits-All" For Every Community

The methodology that your CoC selects for its count depends on a variety of factors, including the size and characteristics of the community and the resources available for the count. Generally speaking, it is advisable to perform a basic count and observation combined with an interview component (Method 2) for your first count. The interviews will provide baseline data on unsheltered homeless people, including chronically homeless people. The data will help your CoC to plan services and track progress in helping unsheltered homeless people and to complete the Continuum of Care Homeless Population and Subpopulation Chart chart of the CoC application. If your community already has good data on the characteristics of unsheltered homeless people (most often from outreach providers), a basic count and observation is probably sufficient for the point-in-time effort. It is important to note that the interview component does not have to be repeated every year, nor does it need to take place at the same time as the count. Once initial data are collected, you may be able to alternate the years in which you do a count, observation, and interview process (Method 2) with the years in which you do only a basic count (Method 1).

### Tips from CoCs With Experience Conducting Public Places Counts

Unsheltered homeless counts are challenging to organize and complete, especially for communities that are conducting them for the first time. Over time, public places counts get easier and become an annual, semi-annual, or quarterly event that can be used to monitor changes in unsheltered homeless populations, as well as increase awareness of homelessness issues among government officials and the public. First-timers should remember some basic tenets:

- ***Don't reinvent the wheel.*** Chances are other communities of your size, geography, and resources have conducted a count. Talk with them about how they have conducted their public places count. If the methods appear to be solid, consider using that community's approach as a blueprint for your first count.

- ***Communicate with your community.*** Begin the process of discussing an unsheltered homeless count with members of your Continuum and others in the community long before you begin the formal planning. Almost every community that conducts a successful public places count emphasizes the importance of participation and "buy-in" from different groups, including a variety of community groups, social service providers, advocacy groups, volunteer organizations, faith-based groups, police departments, universities, and business organizations.

- ***Be prepared for media attention.*** Not every count will receive media attention. However, it is important to think about the purpose of the count and the message you might want to convey to the media, if necessary. Several communities use their regular public places count to draw attention to the issue of homelessness. This can be an effective strategy to garner additional funding for homeless assistance programs, but can go awry if the message about the purpose of the count is inconsistent.

The importance of involving a wide spectrum of community groups and stakeholders cannot be overstated. Organizing a politically neutral committee to oversee the planning and implementation of the count is ideal. This group should decide on key issues from the outset. Eight months before its first count in 2003, Pathways Community Network, Inc. (PCNI), the census project manager for the Metro Atlanta Tri-Jurisdictional CoC, formed a nine-member Advisory Board to provide project oversight for the public places count that covered the city of Atlanta.

## 3.3 Identifying Locations to Cover in the Count

This task may be harder than it seems. Homeless people often move to and from locations depending on the time of day, season of the year, level of police harassment, and other factors. Usually there are obvious places that everyone agrees should be included in the count because homeless people are frequently there. But what about the places where one or two homeless people are occasionally seen? What about places where homeless people are often seen but are dangerous to search, such as abandoned buildings? How do you deal with commercial establishments that are open all night, such as coffee shops, laundromats, or movie theatres, where a homeless person may rest? What about people sleeping in vehicles parked on the same block that you have identified as a known location?

Your Continuum will have to establish rules about what to do in each of these situations so that enumerators will know how to proceed on the day of the count. You should also try to identify other situations that will require a systemic response to ensure that your count proceeds smoothly, efficiently, and safely.

To identify the locations that should be covered, you must solicit input from a variety of sources during the design phase of the count. As you obtain this input, you will also be building relationships that can result in a more effective count with a broad base of participation. Informative partners may include, but are not limited to: outreach workers, previously or currently homeless individuals, shelter and non-shelter services staff, police, human services departments or organizations, business associations, community development organizations, and other community groups.

Once the input has been gathered a final list of locations must be identified, taking into consideration safety concerns and resource feasibility. You will need to decide, for example, whether to allow enumerators to enter abandoned buildings or actively look for and count people sleeping in cars. In addition, you will need to develop guidelines that enumerators can follow for counting and/or interviewing in:

> In Philadelphia, enumerators cover public transportation stations, but do not include subway tunnels because of serious safety concerns. Teams only cover underground public transportation areas where radios or cell phones function.

- Parks
- Alleys
- Parking ramps
- Public transportation systems
- Campgrounds
- Encampments, shantytowns, and tent cities
- Under overpasses and bridges
- Commercial establishments.

The key to a successful and accurate count is to ensure, to the best of your ability, that such decisions are implemented in a consistent manner throughout the public places count, from the training for enumerators to the description of your methodology in a final report or grant application.

### Maintaining Consistency from Year to Year

Maintaining consistency from year to year in the geographic areas covered is important. Communities typically identify the coverage area and then divide the area into “sections” or “study areas” that are assigned to a team of enumerators. Enumerators should be able to canvass the study area in a few hours even if a large number of homeless people are encountered. Some CoCs also try to draw the study area boundaries to take advantage of existing barriers, such as railroad tracks and highways (making it less likely that a homeless person will cross from one area to the next during the time frame of the count), while others draw the study areas to coincide with Census boundaries to enable comparison with Census data. Where the same locations are canvassed year after year, keeping the boundaries of study areas consistent from year to year can help with collecting and comparing data over time. Your community can always add new study areas if the coverage of your count expands.

**Examples of Locations Covered in Public Places Counts**

- In Tallahassee, enumerators cover known locations on the street and encampments in the woods, but not abandoned buildings due to safety concerns. Enumerators ask each interviewed person to identify additional locations where homeless people may be living or sleeping, as well as names of potential interviewees (known as the "snowball" technique).

- The Pasadena CoC tries to count every known location where homeless people live or congregate, including a street, park, car, abandoned building, all-night commercial establishment, other private property, or freeway overpass. Pasadena's outreach team updates the map of known locations as needed and prior to the count.

- In Seattle/King County, the count focuses on publicly accessible areas and includes those people sleeping on the street or in alleys, doorways, cars, and makeshift shelters. Enumerators perform the count on foot, but do not canvass abandoned buildings or private property. Enumerators do count people living in densely vegetated areas under freeways and bridges. Enumerators also try to encourage youth squatting in abandoned houses or buildings to come forward and complete a special survey, but do not actually enter the abandoned structures.

- The Washington Balance of State CoC is composed mainly of rural counties. Each county organizes and performs its own count during a selected 24-hour period based on the instructions and technical assistance provided by the CoC. The CoC requests that counties enumerate in known locations and emphasizes safety concerns. Counties can determine which locations or encampments are included in the count. Enumerators in some counties cover locations in state parks, public and private forests, and other rural areas with tent encampments.

- In rural McHenry County (IL), homeless individuals assisted in identifying tent encampments for the purposes of the count, but requested that the revealed locations be kept confidential.

## 3.4 Selecting a Date and Time

### Picking a Date

It is a generally accepted best practice for CoCs to conduct the counts of unsheltered and sheltered homeless people on the same night to avoid double counting people who may be in a shelter one night and on the streets the next. Because it is easier to count people in shelters than on the street or in other places not meant for human habitation, conducting the count on a night when the shelters are most full will likely lead to the most accurate count. Most Continuums with cold winters pick a winter or early spring night for the counts (December, January, February, or March) because this is when the shelters are likely to be at peak capacity. Other CoCs conduct two or more public places counts during the course of the year to better understand seasonal variations. Philadelphia, for example, does four counts and McHenry County (IL) conducts two.

Beginning in 2005, however, HUD will request that every Continuum conduct their public places count during the last week of January. This timeframe was selected to provide consistency to the national data HUD receives from CoCs and because, in most regions of the country, it is the time of the year when shelter use peaks. Counting and interviewing people sleeping in public places during the winter months may lead to a more realistic picture of chronically unsheltered homeless people, those most resistant to using services. In addition, winter is the season when people are most concerned about the ability of homeless people to survive. A count on one of the coldest nights of the year can be very effective in raising public awareness of the challenges faced by homeless people without shelter.

**HUD STANDARD**

**Consistency in the Timing of the Count is Important**

In 2005, HUD specifies that all the counts in the country take place during the same week – the last week in January – in order to generate comparable numbers and to increase public awareness of homeless issues. This will also provide some basis for comparison from year to year (although changing weather conditions and differing data collection methodologies may still make such comparisons difficult). HUD will permit CoCs to conduct public places counts at a different time of the year, provided they have a sufficient rationale that is clearly stated in the relevant portions of the CoC application. In some communities, public places counts are an annual tradition, taking place at the same time every year. Other communities may have unique reasons for proposing a different point in time.

In addition to seasonal variations, conducting the count during the last week in January addresses several other factors that may impact a public places count. These include:

***The time of the month.*** Depending on the date of your locality's monthly dispersal of income benefits, the number and composition of the unsheltered population can change. For example, in Philadelphia, the quarterly "street" counts take place on the third Wednesday of the month in order to identify persons who may be temporarily housed at the beginning of the month (due to some type of public assistance income) but spend the rest of the month on the street.

***The day of the week.*** To facilitate the identification of homeless people, pick a day of the week with less pedestrian traffic. For example, Boston purposefully chose a Monday night. Your Continuum should also ensure that there are no special events occurring during the count that may draw large numbers of people to your area.

***Picking a date can be contentious.*** Several CoCs reported that selecting a date for the count can be challenging. Although HUD's new timeframe (the last week in January) will alleviate some of the debate, no date will be absolutely perfect for everyone in the community. In addition, you will not be able to anticipate every contingency, especially the weather. The best way to choose a day for the count is to consult with a wide range of local stakeholders during the early stages of planning.

### Picking a Time

Counts of homeless people sleeping in public places generally take place late at night (from midnight until 3:00 am) or start very early in the morning (often beginning before 4:00 am). Generally, the best practice is to conduct the public places count of unsheltered homeless people on the same night as the count of people in shelters *and* when the shelters are closed (i.e., in the middle of the night). The goal is to minimize the risk of double counting homeless persons.

Circumstances may limit a community's ability to complete the public places count in one night. This may occur if a CoC has relatively few people available to conduct the count; if the count covers a large geographic area; or if the CoC chooses to combine its public places count with a service-based count (described in Chapter 4), which typically takes place during the day. These circumstances suggest that there may be valid reasons to conduct the count over more than one night. However, CoCs must have a way of dealing with the double counting that is likely to occur when the count extends beyond a single point in time (see Section 3.9 *Dealing with Duplication*).

**Conducting the Count in "Waves" to Cover a Large Terrain with Limited Resources**

In order to cover two counties plus the City of Atlanta in a single night with a limited number of experienced enumerators, the Metro Atlanta Tri-Jurisdictional CoC conducted its public places count in two waves. Atlanta's homeless shelters begin releasing clients as early as 4:00 am, so it was imperative to complete the count of unsheltered homeless people in areas around the shelters early in the night. As a result, the first wave of the count began at 1:00 am and was focused on parts of the jurisdiction with the highest concentration of homeless people and a significant number of homeless shelters. The enumeration teams were then redeployed around 4:45 am to cover less dense, outlying areas.

## 3.5 Deciding Who Should Conduct the Count and Providing Training

Conducting a "street" count is a big task. In most communities, homeless outreach staff provide the foundation for conducting a public places count because of their working knowledge of homeless individuals in the area, experience providing services to those on the streets, and availability to conduct the actual count. Other communities, like Washington, DC, primarily use outreach workers, but most need to enlist additional help. Further assistance can come from city departments (e.g., human services or police departments), social service organizations, or community volunteers.

### Using Formerly Homeless People To Help With A Public Places Count

Several CoCs rely on input and assistance from currently or formerly homeless people when planning, organizing, and implementing a count. When recruiting homeless individuals, your community should be sensitive to any shelter restrictions that may limit participation, such as program curfews or other requirements. Homeless people are an indispensable resource to a successful public places count and should be incorporated in the count process. Currently or formerly homeless people can assist a public places count by:

- ***Helping to identify known locations in advance of the count.*** Homeless people are a vital resource as your community tries to target known locations where unsheltered populations are living. Even if facility curfews prevent many currently homeless individuals from participating on the night of the count, it is wise to solicit their input during the planning process.
- ***Participating in the count.*** Several Continuums recruit and encourage the participation of homeless individuals on the night of the count. Homeless individuals may either participate as volunteers or be paid.

**How Homeless People Have Assisted With Public Places Counts**

**Long Beach, CA** – During the 2003 count, formerly or currently homeless individuals were included on each of 63 teams covering the city. After the public places count, formerly homeless individuals were hired and trained to conduct comprehensive surveys with a subset of the sheltered and unsheltered people counted during the enumeration.

**Atlanta, GA** – Local service providers recommended currently and formerly homeless individuals to work on the public places count. Recruits frequently originated from the Veterans Affairs Compensated Work Therapy program. Individuals were paid $10 per hour to participate in a “dry run” of the public places count, work on teams during the enumeration, and conduct surveys of a sample of homeless individuals following the count. The count incorporated about 100 formerly homeless persons, each paired with a community or service provider volunteer on the night of the count.

**McHenry County, IL** – The outreach worker in charge of enumerating unsheltered homeless individuals in this rural area enlisted the help of two previously homeless individuals to assist in identifying known locations and to help count and interview people during visits to the tent communities. The locations were kept confidential.

### Using Police Officers to Help With a Public Places Count

Police departments can be a valuable resource for a public places count. Police officers can provide accurate information about known locations where homeless people live and sleep, and can also assist with the data collection and interviewing process. Uniformed police officers are especially valuable in accompanying enumerators and surveying areas that are notoriously unsafe (e.g., abandoned buildings and alleys).

However, the use of police officers must be considered very carefully. Because homeless individuals may have criminal records, be engaged in illegal activities, or have had negative experiences with the police, they may be less forthcoming with information or avoid being counted if they know that police are involved in the count. The participation of police officers could be particularly detrimental for data collection on homeless youth.

### Using Volunteers to Help With a Public Places Count

While some communities are able to conduct the count by just using staff from local service providers and outreach organizations, most Continuums recruit community volunteers to assist with the point-in-time data collection. Communities rely on volunteers for several reasons. First, volunteers contribute to the overall capacity of the count and allow a greater geographic area to be covered. Second, many communities consciously view the event as an opportunity to educate the public about homeless issues and to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to work on a common task. In Long Beach, CA, the enumeration teams include a previously or currently homeless individual, a representative from a social service provider, and a community member.

Communities recruit volunteers from a variety of sources and typically provide training. CoCs recommend recruiting enough volunteers to send teams of two or more people to canvass study areas (for safety reasons it is not advisable to send people out alone). Below is a discussion of where to find volunteers, what to expect of them, when to recruit them, and what kind of training they may need.

***Recruiting Methods***

Communities use an array of methods to recruit volunteers for public places counts, including:

- Posting notices at government or non-profit agencies;
- Mailing or e-mailing invitations to key individuals and agencies;
- Contacting coalition members or agency heads by telephone and asking them to recruit among their memberships or employees; and
- Running a newspaper advertisement to recruit volunteers from the general public.

All appeals to volunteers should describe the time involved in volunteering, the necessity of and the duration of training, any risks to volunteers, and the safety measures that are in place. The notice or invitation should also describe the value of the information that will be gained from their efforts.

Volunteers may be recruited among:

- Members of local coalitions for homeless people
- People who work with homeless people in soup kitchens, shelters, and other services
- Formerly or currently homeless individuals
- State or city workers in agencies that may have some experience or interest in homelessness, such as human services, health, or housing agencies
- Human service professionals, who have had some involvement in providing social services, particularly to homeless persons
- Community service volunteer organizations such as AmeriCorps and Volunteers of America
- Churches and other religious organizations
- College or university students
- Neighborhood associations
- Business associations.

### *How Far in Advance to Recruit*

The timing of your volunteer recruitment effort will depend on the method you use for recruiting; whether the study has been done before; and how much time you need to schedule training (in general, the more training, the more lead time needed). In addition, CoCs in rural areas may find it more difficult to recruit volunteers due to the dispersed nature of service providers and community residents, as well as perceived safety risks associated with going into isolated or wooded areas. Recruiting appropriate volunteers in rural areas may require the CoC to use multiple recruitment methods (e.g., mailings, newspaper advertisements, and telephone calls to key agencies) and to start the recruitment process early.

**Recruiting Volunteers**

**Boston -** After twenty years of conducting annual street counts, the City of Boston has a base of approximately 150 volunteers who participate regularly. Six weeks prior to the count, organizers send a mailing to all homeless services providers and past volunteers and e-mail all city employees to recruit for the upcoming enumeration. Several weeks are spent gathering responses and organizing volunteers into teams with team leaders. Team leaders are individuals who have experience working with homeless populations, while other members of the team are a mix of inexperienced and seasoned volunteers.

**Seattle/King County -** The Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless begins recruiting volunteers two months prior to the public places count by sending out a general announcement for volunteers through its member agencies. The Coalition also creates a half-page flyer that provides the date and time, describes the training session, and asks volunteers to organize themselves into teams of three to four people with a designated team leader. About a month before the count, the Coalition also sends personal letters inviting the governor, the mayor, city council members, county representatives, and other elected officials to participate. These letters request a response by a specific date (about a week before the count), which gives count organizers enough time to train and place these officials on appropriate enumeration teams.

### *Training*

Training enumerators is important to produce an accurate count of unsheltered homeless people. All participants must know the ground rules, how to record information on the enumerations forms, where to report results, what to do in case of trouble, and other procedures for the count. Pairing a new volunteer with one who has done the count before is a good idea, but training is desirable for everyone each time your Continuum conducts the public places count. Training is especially important for new volunteers and also serves as a reminder to "old hands" of the count procedures. The training should alert everyone to any procedural changes from one year to the next.

It is essential to specify carefully who should be counted and what information is to be obtained by observation. Counts typically exclude people in uniforms (e.g., security guards, police, building maintenance people), people engaged in commercial transactions (often drugs and prostitution, but also delivering newspapers or other goods), and obviously non-homeless people (e.g., people leaving a bar at 2:00 am). During the training, you should present and review the protocol for every public place location, such as parks, alleys, parking ramps, and abandoned buildings. You should also prepare a one or two-page summary of the enumeration guidelines for distribution to volunteers.

> When training volunteers it is important to be clear about who will and will not be counted. Be sure to include these procedures in any report or grant application you prepare about your enumeration.

The intensity of training will depend on the level of experience of the volunteers and whether volunteers will be required to conduct interviews. CoCs that have done counts for many years using the same cadre of experienced enumerators may opt to require training only for team leaders. Boston and Seattle only conduct training for team leaders who, in turn, provide informal training to new volunteers immediately before and during the count. If the training is only required for team leaders, it can take place on a separate day and run for a few hours. The key to this approach is making sure that the team leaders pass along instructions to the other volunteers and monitor data collection so that the information is gathered consistently. Other CoCs require that all volunteers attend training (e.g., New York City, Broward County). In order to ensure that the training requirement does not detract from participation in the count, training for all volunteers usually takes place immediately before the count and is usually brief (approximately one hour).

Here are examples of training approaches adopted in several communities:

- ***Philadelphia:*** Most volunteers that assist with Philadelphia's quarterly street enumerations are affiliated with homeless service providers, social service agencies, or other government departments. When the count first began in 1998, organizers ran hour-long trainings prior to the "street" count. Enumerators have since become very experienced and Philadelphia no longer conducts formal training sessions. Volunteers are sent out in groups of two or three, with experienced enumerators paired with new volunteers.
- ***Washington Balance of State:*** Due to the decentralized nature of this CoC's public places count, CoC staff provide technical assistance to counties in the form of paper instructions, regional and on-site training, and telephone consultation and support.
- ***Broward County:*** Prior to the count, all volunteers participate in a half-day training. The session includes guidance on how to use the survey instrument, safety protocols, emergency contacts, and instructions on the locations that volunteers should visit during the count.

## 3.6 Organizing the Count

A point-in-time count of public places requires some basic logistics planning. This section reviews preparation activities, including preparation timetables, pre-count advertising, and pre-testing areas.

### Planning for the Night of the Count

Organizers will need to plan ahead to determine procedures for the night of the count. This means:

> If possible, budget for food and drink. Your volunteers will appreciate coffee, other warm beverages, sandwiches, doughnuts, and other forms of sustenance. In Seattle/King County, volunteers share a breakfast after the count donated by the Board of Directors of one of the Coalition member organizations.

- Dividing the count locations up into “sections” or “study areas” that a team of enumerators can reasonably cover during the time of the count;
- Determining the relative safety of the different sections and assigning locations to the appropriately sized and experienced groups of enumerators;
- Deciding whether to cover the sections by foot or by car;
- Making maps of the sections so enumerators know where they are to go;
- Establishing some method of communication (typically cell phones, radios, or walkie-talkies) and arranging for the necessary equipment;
- Arranging for additional on-call outreach in case unsheltered people request services and providing enumerators with homeless services resource guides to distribute when information is requested;
- Preparing a one- to two-page summary of enumeration procedures to distribute to volunteers; and
- Creating and reproducing sufficient copies of the sheets on which enumerators record their counts and observations.

**Additional Tips for a Successful Count**

Supply your enumerators with wallet-sized homeless services resource guides to distribute to homeless people if requested. The United Way in Atlanta provided nearly 1,000 resource guides, which included a fold-out map with service providers' locations, eligibility requirements, and hours of operation.

Equip enumerators with necessary supplies, including:

- Flashlights (with fresh batteries!);
- Replacement batteries;
- A method of communication (cell phone, radio) and central number to call;
- Clip boards;
- A sufficient number of tally sheets; and
- Pens and pencils.

Finally, be sure to plan for unexpected occurrences on the night of the count and to have enough staff to deal with problems. For example, you need to have contingency plans in place if team leaders or volunteers do not show up.

### Preparation Timetables for Public Places Counts

The preparation for a first-time count will require more advanced notice, time, and effort. The good news is that it gets easier, you can streamline your process each time you do a count, and much of the investment of time and energy will facilitate an easier planning process in subsequent years. Experienced CoCs usually start planning two to three months before the count, while CoCs planning a count for the first time may take six months to a year to plan the effort. Chapter 5 provides examples of preparation timelines for Boston and Atlanta.

### Pre-count Advertising

In most cases, it is a good idea to inform both the homeless people in your community and the general public that the count is taking place. Some CoCs have expressed concern about advertising the count too widely because unsheltered homeless people may choose to move away or hide on the night of the count. Although these concerns may be valid in some cases, in general it is good practice to provide homeless people with some advance warning, particularly since the count is likely to take place when they are sleeping and therefore in a position of particular vulnerability.

- ***Tallahassee:*** A few days before the count, the organizers visit known locations (streets and wooded areas) and introduce themselves to any homeless people living in the area. The purpose of the visit is two-fold: to inform homeless people about the rationale behind the count and to ensure that enumerators are able to locate the sites during the count.

- ***Pasadena:*** Outreach workers distribute a handout to the homeless people in shelters and soup kitchens to provide advance warning. The handout explains why it is important for homeless people to participate in the count.

- ***Washington Balance of State****:* Service providers talk to homeless people about the count in advance. In several counties, newspaper articles inform the public about the enumerations.

**Using Outreach Workers to Advertise the Count**

Informing and educating unsheltered homeless people about the public places count helps to prevent widespread avoidance of the enumerators. Asking outreach workers to talk with their clients about the public places count about a week prior to the event is probably the best way to notify people who live in public places.

If your community does not have regular outreach workers, consider visiting the count sites prior to the date of the count. Be sure to emphasize that the count gathers information to improve homeless services and, if appropriate, is anonymous or confidential.

### Pre-screening and Pre-testing Sites

Pre-screening or pre-testing the selected study areas will produce better enumeration results. Pre-screening will alert organizers to any problems or issues in each study area, including hidden locations that enumerators might overlook and differing patterns of use between the day or night. Pre-screening also provides an opportunity for organizers to clarify confusing study area boundaries and characteristics: which parts of the street; how far down the street; whether to cross the street or go down the adjacent alley; whether to count people inside commercial establishments; and not to count people who are clearly visible but are across a street that forms the boundary with another count area.

A few communities also carry out a pre-test, or a “dry-run,” on a subset of sites prior to the count. CoCs performing a count for the first time often conduct pre-tests. A pre-test helps determine if the procedures, materials, and training that you plan to use on the night of the count are sufficient or if you need to make alterations. Pre-testing should occur far enough in advance of the count for communities to make any needed adjustments.

**Pre-screening** involves visiting each study area to better understand the site and identify any special characteristics that enumerators should consider on the night of the count. **Pre-testing** is a “dry-run” of a point-in-time count in a sample of study areas. A pre-test can help organizers identify and resolve procedural issues or other problems prior to the count.

**Conducting a Pre-test in Atlanta**

A few weeks prior to its first count, the metropolitan Atlanta CoC conducted a pre-test in a sample of census block groups to ensure the methods, training, and materials were appropriate and sufficient to generate an accurate count. As a result of problems encountered during the pre-test, organizers decided to release enumerators in two waves, one at 1:00 am and the second at approximately 4:45 am. The purpose of the change was two-fold: to avoid double counting individuals who had stayed in shelters the night before, but were released to the streets very early in the morning; and to ensure the coverage of all the study areas with a limited number of enumerators.

### Safety Concerns

Safety issues are serious concerns for rural and urban areas. In rural areas, the remote locations of encampments may raise unique safety concerns for enumerators if problems arise – for example, no cellular phone or radio reception or being a great distance from the nearest police station. In urban areas, abandoned buildings may be structurally unsafe or havens for illicit activities. The most experienced individuals, generally outreach or other paid staff, should conduct the enumeration at potentially dangerous sites. Organizers should also consider using police escorts – carefully weighing the pros and cons of such an action.

**A Note on Abandoned Buildings**

Counting homeless people in abandoned buildings is problematic for many reasons, especially safety concerns. Continuums deal with this issue in a variety of ways:

- Prior to the count, Atlanta, GA identifies dangerous areas, particularly those with abandoned buildings or encampments known to be centers for drug or other illegal activities. These areas are assigned to trained, formerly homeless employees who are sometimes accompanied by police officers.
- A study conducted in Houston, TX used a sampling method to determine how many homeless people were living in abandoned buildings. The City of Houston maintained a roster of "habitable abandoned buildings." Using this list, researchers were able to develop a sample of such buildings and send enumerators to these structures to complete interviews. The study determined that approximately one-fourth of all sampled abandoned buildings served as a "home" for at least one person, many of whom were part of particularly vulnerable populations, such as unaccompanied youth or the seriously mentally ill.

## 3.7 Determining Who Is Homeless: Enumerator Judgment vs. Screener Questions

An enumerator cannot assume that everyone encountered in a public place between 12:00 am and 4:00 am is homeless. While the only way to definitively determine an individual's homeless status is to conduct a brief interview, many communities rely on the observational judgment of enumerators. For many Continuums, a key decision is whether to conduct the count based on enumerator observation or to also ask "screener" questions to determine the housing status of each person counted.

### Enumeration by Observation/Judgment

Some communities perform a count and collect basic information via observation. Philadelphia, Seattle, and Boston take this approach. In Philadelphia, enumerators are instructed to assume that individuals are homeless if they are sleeping or panhandling on the street during the count (from 12:00 am to 3:00 am). In Seattle/King County, enumerators are told to observe and tally individuals by activity, for example, sleeping or "walking with no destination." (A copy of Seattle's tally sheet is provided in Chapter 5.) Boston's tally sheet asks enumerators to assess their level of confidence in their observations by asking whether the person counted is "definitely" or "possibly" homeless. In Philadelphia, Seattle, Boston, and many other communities, volunteers are specifically instructed not to wake people up. Many CoCs do not want to disturb homeless individuals or make any person feel vulnerable or unsafe.

### Enumeration by Screening

For its 2003 count of unsheltered homeless people in Manhattan, New York City used a brief set of screening questions to determine who was homeless. Enumerators asked all people who were awake if they had a place to live or a place they considered home and, if so, what type of place the "home" was. To avoid double counting, enumerators also asked each person whether anyone else had asked them the same questions that night. Enumerators then used their judgment to fill out information about the person's gender, age group (under 21, 21-55, over 55), race, and to record any distinguishing identifiers such as unusual facial hair, scars, tattoos, or clothing. This information was used to help ensure that the same person was not counted twice. At the end of the screening interview, if a person was determined to be homeless, enumerators were instructed to offer transportation to a shelter. The Department of Homeless Services had vans prepared to transport homeless individuals to shelter throughout the night. Enumerators also recorded people believed to be homeless but who did not answer the screening questions because they were sleeping.

Other communities require enumerators to ask screener questions to find out where the person slept the previous night and whether it is the place they regularly stay. Screener questions are necessary to conduct a count of unsheltered homeless people using the service-based approach and are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Examples of surveys containing screener questions, including New York's form, are provided in Chapter 5.

## 3.8 Interviewing for Supplemental Information

If your CoC does not have access to reliable demographic, service use, and needs data on the unsheltered homeless population in your community, you may want to conduct interviews as part of the public places enumeration, especially if it is your CoC's first count. Interviews can provide additional information about service use patterns, as well as disability and demographic information that can be used to better understand the needs of homeless people and complete portions of the CoC application. Conducting a survey, however, will require additional effort and resources. An interview form must be developed, interviewers need to be trained in its use, and ground rules should be established to identify whom to approach.

A particular challenge of incorporating interviews into a public places count is determining how and when to conduct the interviews. Moreover, CoCs often need to complete the basic count within a short period of time (before significant movement occurs among the unsheltered homeless population). A time-consuming interview process is often not practical within that kind of timeframe. Most important, interviewing during early morning or late evening hours is viewed by many CoC staff as disruptive and discourteous. Because the use of interviews is required in the service-based approach, interviewing methods are covered in detail in Chapter 4.

To avoid time-consuming interviews during the count, you could consider distributing meal tickets or another incentive during the count. The incentive can be redeemed the next day after the individual completes an interview. A central location or multiple sites could be made available for the interviews. The Census Bureau implemented this strategy successfully during data collection for the 1996 National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients.

If you decide to conduct interviews during the point-in-time count, you may want to consider a sampling strategy that allows you to interview a subset of the people counted. In order to construct a statistically representative sample, it is helpful to know about the characteristics of the unsheltered homeless people in your community – age, gender, household type, ethnicity – and the locations where distinctive segments of the population live. You may be able to get some of this information from local outreach providers. If this is the case, you could construct a purposive sample (with some statistical help from a consultant or local university) that reflects the broader populations you want to survey.

Most CoCs will not have this kind of detailed information about the unsheltered homeless people in the community. In the absence of detailed information, the best approach is to systematically interview every *n*th person encountered in each location. For example, you may decide to interview every 5$^{th}$ or every 10$^{th}$ person that you count. To determine what the interval should be, you will need to make some estimates in advance about:

- How many total people you are likely to encounter;
- How large an interview sample you need for the types of analyses you want to conduct; and
- What level of resources you have to devote to conducting the interviews.

The number of interviews you need to complete is affected by the types of analyses you want to conduct as well as the size of your unsheltered homeless population. Do you just want to find out about the overall characteristics of the unsheltered homeless population? Or do you want to focus on answering questions about the characteristics of a subpopulation, for example, the severely mentally ill? To understand the general characteristics of the unsheltered homeless people in your community, choose a sample size based on the known or estimated size of the population:

- If your community has a small population of unsheltered homeless people (200 people or fewer) you should conduct interviews with at least half of those you encounter.
- If your community's unsheltered homeless population is larger than 200 people, you should complete at least 100 interviews.

If you want to better understand the characteristics of a subpopulation, you need to conduct interviews with enough individuals to be able to generalize the results. At minimum, you should interview 30 to 50 individuals categorized in the subpopulation you are curious about. If the subpopulation is fewer than 30 people, you should interview each individual.

There is no standard rule of thumb for determining the appropriate sample size for a survey. The more complicated or detailed your questions become, the greater the likelihood that you will need to consult an expert who knows about sampling.

## 3.9 Dealing with Duplication

An accurate estimate of the size of a homeless population relies greatly on conducting an unduplicated count; that is, making sure that each person has been counted once and only once. If part of the population is missed, you will underestimate the size of the population; if some population members are counted more than once, you will overestimate the size of the population. In both situations you will misrepresent the characteristics of the homeless people in your community.

Conducting your public places and shelter count on the same night addresses some of the problems of duplication. If your CoC begins and ends the public places count after shelters close and before significant movement occurs among unsheltered populations (i.e., late at night), you reduce the chances that some homeless persons are counted twice. This approach also assumes that the boundaries between count areas are clear and enumerators understand not to count people they can see, but who are not in their area. By contrast, duplication is much more of a problem if the count extends beyond one night or takes place during the day at service locations used by homeless people that may or may not use shelter. (For this reason, duplication is primarily discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of the service-based approach.)

At a minimum, count organizers should always assign enumeration teams to particular geographic areas and should ensure that the boundaries for each team are clearly specified with maps and verbal or written instructions.  Using existing boundaries such as railroad tracks, creeks, and highways helps reduce the likelihood that homeless people will move from one area to another while the count is ongoing.  Nevertheless, even a one-night public places count risks some duplication if enumerators stray into each other's study areas or all-night transit systems allow homeless people to move around with relative ease.  Some CoCs ask enumerators to record information on their tally sheets that may help flag cases where someone has been counted twice.  For example, in New York City enumerators asked each person encountered (assuming the person was not asleep) whether he or she had been surveyed already that night, and recorded the person's gender, approximate age, and ethnicity, as well as the location and time of the encounter and any unusual physical characteristics.  If a person reported more than one interview, analysts reviewed the other tally sheets to see if anyone matching that person's description was counted.  In 2003, only 10 unsheltered people were interviewed twice out of the 594 individuals interviewed.

## 3.10 Biases, Feasibility, and Cost

### Biases

The use of a one-day (point-in-time) count, as opposed to a count that occurs over a longer period of time, can raise concerns of bias.  A point-in-time enumeration is simply one picture or "snap shot" of a homeless population on one night during the year, which may or may not be representative of the population on average.  Communities should be careful about the conclusions they draw from point-in-time counts and be aware of the assumptions behind this methodology.  While a public places count is certainly subject to seasonal and other variations, it is currently the most feasible method for gathering important information on homeless individuals and families.  Even with the increased use of Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS), public places counts are needed to gather information on those individuals who never come into contact with the homeless service providers that contribute data to the HMIS.

Here are some other biases and issues to consider in using a public places count:

- A <u>known locations</u> approach will be biased to the extent that the list of known locations may miss areas where homeless people live or gather, thereby resulting in an undercount.  This selection or exclusion of certain areas results in bias against the people who might have been found in those locations.  Decisions to exclude particular types of locations, such as vehicles or abandoned buildings, also results in biases and, ultimately, an undercount.
- <u>Complete coverage</u> of a geographical area corrects for some biases inherent in the known locations approach, however, the exclusion of different types of places (cars, etc.) may also result in an undercount.
- <u>Timing</u> is crucial to an accurate public places count.  Double counting may result from counts that exceed a few hours, unless you have a method for eliminating

duplication. When a count must extend longer than a few hours or even take place over a couple of days, it is important to conduct interviews and use unique identifying information to unduplicate results (see Chapter 4).

- Information collected through interviews of unsheltered homeless people is self-reported; that is, the information is provided by the homeless individual. Self-reported data collection is not the same as tracking the person's service use or clinical diagnoses. Although self-reporting is problematic, particularly for individuals with serious mental illnesses, it can provide valuable information about the characteristics, disabilities, and service needs of unsheltered homeless persons.

### Feasibility and Cost

A primary concern for every community planning a public places count is cost. The public places counts conducted by communities contacted for this guide were either coordinated by CoC staff or outside consultants, and range from very expensive ($150,000) to less expensive efforts ($500). It is feasible to conduct a fairly reliable public places count with a limited budget by making significant use of volunteers. Unquestionably, staff time and energy will be necessary to design, plan, and implement the public places count. The payoff is having better information with which to target limited resources for service planning purposes and to document local needs in funding applications. Communities fund and implement counts using multiple approaches, including:

- Several large CoCs do not have a separate budget for the count, relying solely on staff and volunteer efforts. The two staff members from New York's Department of Homeless Services who organized New York City's 2003 "street" count estimate that they spent 100 percent of their time preparing for the count in the month leading up to it. One staff member worked full-time the month after the count to complete the data analysis.

- The Director of Boston's Emergency Shelter Commission devotes 35 to 40 percent of her time on the count for two weeks in advance, and 100 percent of her time the week of the count. In addition, the count requires the equivalent of one full-time staff person for a full six weeks.

- In its multi-jurisdictional count, the Washington Balance of State CoC spent approximately $4,500 on a technical assistance consultant and used staff time from the CoC lead agency valued at approximately $5,000.

- Atlanta conducted its first count and survey of sheltered and unsheltered populations in 2003. Pathways Community Network, Inc. (PCNI), the census project manager for the Tri-Jurisdictional CoC, chose to hire a research consulting company to help develop the methodology, manage the logistics of the count, and write the report. PCNI directly supervised the consultant, while a nine-member Advisory Board made up of subject matter experts and one homeless service provider was actively involved in project oversight and the setting of policies and procedures. The total cost for the study was approximately $120,000. This included: $48,000 in consultant fees; $32,000 in direct expenses (e.g., paying for homeless enumerators and surveyors, supplies for the night of the count, and printing); and $40,000 in in-kind contributions from CoC agencies and other contributors.

- Long Beach, CA conducted its first count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people in 2003. The CoC hired a consulting firm to assist in designing and managing the count with a final cost of approximately $150,000 (which also included an in-depth assessment and 10-year planning process).